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Martyrdom of St. John

Master of St. Severin

A Triptych by the Master of St. Severin

ALTHOUGH it may be conceded that the position of the German School of painting in the general history of art is not so important as that of the Italian or the Flemish School, this is due not so much to a less intensive production in the German School as to its slighter influence on foreign centres of art. The German painters were subject to the domination of foreign masters: first the Byzantines and the Italians, then the Flemish painters, and, in the eighteenth century, the French; their own influence, on the other hand, whatever their merits were, remained rare, momentary, and

superficial. This does not diminish in any degree their individual value, and there is a certain injustice in relegating to a secondary place a school which, by reason of its remarkable productivity, its illustrious masters, and its numerous still extant monuments, has some claims to a higher rank.

It is therefore with special pleasure that we have succeeded in enriching the German section of the Museum's collection of paintings. This department has, indeed, remained quite undeveloped until the present year, being represented hitherto by only two pictures: a very interesting painting which was the subject of an article in the Bulletin of July, 1904, "The Death of the Virgin,"

*The Crucifixion**Master of St. Severin*

attributed to Michael Wohlgemuth, and a small panel from the atelier of Cranach, "The Descent from the Cross." We have already called attention to the recent acquisition of a very fine portrait of a lady by Lucas Cranach, dated 1549. The subject of the present article is an important monument of the School of Cologne, a painting which some German critics, Dr. Bode among others, have characterized as a masterpiece.

The work is preserved in its original form. It is a triptych, such as once were often found on the altars of churches and chapels in Flanders and Germany. Few of them have remained in place. Many have found refuge in the public and private collections of Europe; a greater number have been dismembered, the wings being separated from the central panel. The most celebrated of these altarpieces, the famous polyptych of the church of St. Bavon, at Ghent, has been deprived of its wings, which are now in the Museums of Berlin and Brussels, while the central part has remained in the chapel of the family which gave this splendid commission to the Van Eycks. The wings of these triptychs, which were often painted by distinguished masters, ordinarily remained closed. Their exterior sides were decorated in grisaille or with subjects of secondary importance, such as the portraits of the donors and their patron saints. Every care, on the other hand, was bestowed on the execution of the subjects decorating the central panel and the interior sides of the wings, for the triptych was opened during the church services. These customs and precautions have had the happy result of protecting those works from accident throughout their long existence, and their preservation is often excellent. The triptych now

in the Museum is in very good condition. It was painted in 1511 for the altar of the chapel of St. Gertrude at Schloss Eller, near Düsseldorf. It is not known at what time it left its original place or how it found its way in 1887 into the hands of a dealer in Paris. It was found there by Dr. Bode, who wrote of it in a letter of May 17 of that year as "a *chef d'œuvre* of the Master of St. Severin." Afterwards it was shown at several retrospective exhibitions,* and in no case was this attribution to the master of the Cologne School questioned.

The donors of this picture are not represented on the outer sides of the wings, but are shown in the corners of the central panel. The kneeling figures on the outer faces of the wings are, no doubt, favored members of their family, — a man and a woman, each with hands clasped as in prayer, on each wing. Near them, on a terrace paved with marble, and before a wall which is covered with a magnificent gold brocade, stand St. Christopher, the Virgin, St. John the Baptist, and St. Gertrude, with aureoles of gold. The figures of the infant Christ, carried by St. Christopher and by the Virgin, and the lamb which lies on the book held by St. John, have similar aureoles. The heads are contrasted with the pale blue sky, which forms the background. At the right and at the left, above, a portion of an arcade is visible. On the left wing is the inscription *Anno Dm*, but, through some unexplained accident, there is no corresponding date on the other wing.

When the triptych is opened, the Calvary on the central panel is first disclosed. Facing the

* It then entered the famous collection of Consul Weber of Hamburg, which was sold at auction in Berlin in February, 1912. At this sale the painting was purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, which also acquired from the same collection a "Calvary" by Josse van Cleve.

spectator, in the centre, is Christ on the cross. Mary Magdalen, with profile to left, kneels, embracing the cross. At the left the Virgin, who is fainting in the arms of St. John, is attended by two holy women. Mounted men and soldiers are stationed in the second plane, almost all clad in sumptuous garments. At the right and the left are the dying thieves. After the manner of Gothic sculptors, painters, and miniaturists, several scenes from the life of Christ are represented in the background of the picture, in a bright and varied landscape which is dominated by the walls and towers of Jerusalem. At the left are the Entrance of Christ into Jerusalem, Christ on the Mount of Olives, Christ Bearing the Cross; at the right, the Walk to Emmaus, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. The donors, who kneel in the two corners of the foreground, are Conrad von Eynenberg, Herr von Landskron und Drimborn, and his wife, Margaretha von Nesselrode-Hugenpoet. Their coats-of-arms are placed in front, adorned with casques and scrolls in the German fashion.

The landscape of the central panel is continued on the left wing, where the Baptism of Christ is shown. He is shown standing in the Jordan, in nearly a front view, nude, with clasped hands. At the right St. John, with one knee on the ground, holds a book in his left hand and with his right sprinkles water on the head of his divine Master, whose garment is held by an angel kneeling at the left. Above the group appear in the sky God the Father, with adoring angels on either hand, and the Holy Spirit. The landscape which adorns the background is varied by two scenes from the life of St. John: his preaching in the wilderness, and his meeting with Christ. The other wing shows the martyrdom of the Forerunner. In the foreground Salome, richly clad, receives from the hands of the executioner, who still carries his great sword, the head of St. John the Baptist on an elaborately wrought charger of gold. The decapitated body of the saint lies in the foreground with arms crossed. Near Salome are two draped figures, one of which, shown in front view, we might conjecture to be a portrait of the painter. At the left, near the executioner, are a guard, armed with a pike, and an old man. The second plane shows at the left St. John led to prison; at the right, the feast of Herod, where Salome, having placed on the table the charger in which the head lies, is about to dance before the king. The picturesque and pleasing arrangement of this wing is remarkable. On the central panel and on the wings the backgrounds, the aureoles, and certain decorative details and accessories are gilded. The armor of the donor is in silver.

The whole painting shows the wealth of decorative textiles, jewels, and accessories, the profusion of gold and of picturesque detail which characterize at this date the Cologne School, and which are, as it were, a survival from the art of an

earlier time. The darkness of the churches necessitated in certain countries the continuance of the frequent and lavish employment of gold which other countries, Flanders and Italy, for example, had almost entirely abandoned at the beginning of the fifteenth century. It is evident in this triptych that the master who painted it—one who exercised a great influence on the Cologne School at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth—was himself influenced by Quentin Metsys, whose tradition may be recognized in the scene of the Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist. His imitation, however, is not narrow and cold. The Master of St. Severin, whose principal works are in the museums of Cologne, of the University of Bonn, of the Louvre, and of South Kensington (a series of compositions on the life of St. Ursula), and in the church of St. Severin at Cologne, shows original characteristics in a certain accentuation of the features of his figures and in the pleasing arrangement of his pictures; at times, as in the painting at Bonn representing the dream of St. Ursula, he displays, by his astonishing originality in the lighting of his composition, a study of the chiaroscuro and artificial illumination which Rembrandt, more than a century later, was to develop in his paintings and engravings. It is to be hoped that his name and career will some day be known. He liked to clothe his figures in sumptuous decorations, to cover them with delicately adorned armor or jewels, with rich accessories. He gave expression to their feeling rather through their gestures than their physiognomy, which always remains impassive. He was fond of vivid colors, but he knew how to harmonize them agreeably. The flowers with which he embellished the foreground of his landscapes contributed to the picturesqueness and charm of his work. The tendencies and the characteristics of the Cologne School at the end of the fifteenth century and in the first years of the sixteenth are very well symbolized both by his merits and his faults: his attachment to the old formulas, his taste for richness of colors and of accessories, and the strongly accentuated types of his figures. J. G.

Gifts from the Western Art Visiting Committee

THROUGH the generosity of the Western Art Visiting Committee, the Museum has recently acquired the English cupboard illustrated on the following page and now on exhibition in the Lawrence Room. It came from a member of the Knowles family, of Wellington, Shropshire, England, who now lives in America. The two panelled upper doors turn on pegs, while the heavy doors of the lower cupboard have each two solid iron hinges. The border of rosettes across the top of the cupboard matches the carving of the small door panels, and the panels of the ends and lower doors are similar. The two rudely-carved caryatid figures of old men stroking their